

THE MBUTI/VILLAGER RELATIONSHIP

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the huts and the shafts for spears; the ax is used for enlarging the 412
boles in which bees make their hives, so that the honey can be ex-
tracted more easily. Younger Mbuti do not know what they would
do without the machete for cutting saplings. Both they and the older
men realize that the ax is not absolutely essential, and I have seen ax-
shaped clubs used for breaking away the wood from around a hive,
where the wood is rotten, as it frequently is. The older men say that
if they did not have machetes for cutting saplings they would use [324] •
stone tools, but they have no knowledge at all of how to make such
tools, and are probably prompted to make this remark by the presence
in the forest of early stone axheads.

Accepting, for the moment, that the Mbuti in their forest world are 121
not in any position of necessary dependence upon the villagers for food 177*
or material, or technological skill, and admitting that in the village con-
text they are dependent, the question arises as to why they choose to
place themselves in that position of dependence. It is certainly not out
of economic necessity. The truth of the matter is simply that the vil-
lage offers, for a brief while, an agreeable change of pace, an opportu-
nity for a relaxation that is not always possible in the forest, and, one
might say, better hunting, on occasion. An Mbuti band or an Mbuti
family or an Mbuti individual may descend upon a village either be-
cause of sheer whim, or because of laziness if the forest hunting gets
too strenuous, or because of dissension, or indeed for almost any rea-
son except necessity. Whatever the reason, and most commonly it at
least involves an expressed desire for relaxation and freedom from
care, the reason is on the side of the Mbuti, the choice is theirs, and
the dependence that follows is as voluntary as it is temporary.

ECONOMIC RECIPROCITY

We then have to ask what the Mbuti offer in return for the food
and metal products that they receive, and to determine at least the
economic structure of the relationship. In so doing we are inevitably
led to consider the domestic, political and religious aspects and their
interrelationship with the economic system, and it is in these inter-
relationships that inconsistency and conflict emerge.

Even in terms of sheer economic reciprocity the relationship is in- 121
herently unstable. Continuing to grant, for the moment, the fact that 177*
no economic necessity is involved on the part of the Mbuti, and that 439
their dependence is voluntary and temporary, the forest world remain-